SOME WELL-KNOWN ADVENTURERS OF LADAKH

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Ladakh has produced some noted adventurers and enterprising mountaineers during the last three decades of the 19th. century and at the beginning of this century. They were employed by European travellers and explorers who undertook many expeditions to central Asia, Pamir and Tibet through Ladakh on political missions and for the purpose of exploration in those regions.

Among the Ladakhi adventurers, the names of Mohammed Issa, Galwan Rasul, Shukur Ali and Chhumbel are worth mentioning. With the exception of Chhumbel, all the others were Arghon Muslims of Ladakh. The Arghons served as caravan leaders, pony-men, coolies and orderlies for the European explorers.

There is a maxim that the high peaks of the Himalayas cannot be scaled without the co-operation of the Sherpas. The same maxim applies to the Arghons of those days. They bore the main brunt of the rigorous journey. The Arghons also spoke several languages.

Many Europeans have praised them in their books. Captain H.H. Deasy wrote: 'For caravan work, the Arghons of Ladakh are most suitable, being immeasurably superior to the natives of Turkistan.' A.E. Ward expressed his observations in the following words: 'Arghons are the best servants for distant travel being hardy and willing.'

Lord Dunmore paid tribute to the Arghons and Ladakhis in these words:

'There is not the slightest doubt that the men we have are the best pony-men in the world. They are the hardest workers I ever saw, with a thorough knowledge of their business. They are always cheery and generally sing when things look blackest.'

In his paper which Lord Dunmore read before the Royal Geographical Society, he said 'A better set of men, harder or more willing, I have never met', while in the foreword of his book 'The Pamir' he writes:

'It will ill become me to close this preface without paying a just tribute of praise to those excellent and hardworking Ladakhis, headed by Ramzan Ali who formed the personnel of the caravan and accompanied the expedition on foot for 2,200 miles crossing 69 rivers and 41 mountain passes, many of them being amongst the highest in

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the world.’

Referring to his travel to Tibet in 1908, Sven Hedin wrote (Transhimalaya):

'Some of the Ladakhis sing together to lighten the toil of themselves and the animals. They are as cheerful and contented as though they were going to a harvest festival.'

Besides Arghons, Ladakhi Buddhists were employed by the European explorers. They generally served as pony-men and porters.

Lord Dunsmore travelled to Pamir once in his life and gained worldwide fame from his book 'Pamir'. Similarly, Younghusband travelled to central Asia and Tibet through Ladakh twice in his life and is ranked one of the most prominent explorers of the region.

Even though the above Arghon caravan leaders travelled with many Europeans, they are, by and large, unknown and their work is not appreciated. With the exception of Galwan Rasul none of them have left any records of their travels. A few explorers like Hedin, Younghusband and Lord Dunsmore have praised them in their books, highlighting their roles and contributions.

There is no doubt that the basic motive behind the travel of an Arghon was an economic compulsion but the spirit of adventure and desire for globe trotting was also an important factor. Younghusband wrote in the preface of Galwan Rasul's book, Servant of the Sahibs:-

'These men love adventure just as much as their employers.'

The routes adopted by the European travellers to central Asia, Tibet and Pamir were dotted by inaccessible snowbound passes, inhospitable dreary plains and turbulent rivers. The journeys were very hazardous and full of risks. The travellers were under the perpetual threat of snowstorms and avalanches. Inclement weather was vexing. Hedin once recorded forty degrees below zero during his journey in Tibet. Sometimes highwaymen robbed the caravans of their goods.

Tibet was closed to foreigners and travellers had to face great hostility and resistance during their journeys there. Some noted explorers, Rhines, Dalgleish and others, lost their lives while encountering the native population. Sometimes caravans strayed from the paths and suffered untold hardships. The loss of pack animals was staggering. According to Dunmore, forty per cent of the pack animals collapsed on a single journey between Leh and Sinkiang. In one expedition, Hedin lost twenty nine horses and six mules from his total number of fifty eight horses and thirty six mules, with the result that a large quantity of provisions had to be left on the way and the members of the caravan had to face starvation due to the shortage of food.

Under such conditions even the most daring and determined
travellers were disheartened. Whilst crossing the Gobi desert
Younghusband underwent many difficulties. He did not have a wink
of sleep for many days which made him very miserable. According to
his account, he cursed himself for undertaking the journey.

Ramzan Ali travelled from Leh to Srinagar on horseback in
forty eight hours to convey an important message to the British
Resident. It normally took fifteen days in those days. In order to
protect himself from the jolting of the horse, he wrapped his body with
cotton padded clothing and two horses were arranged for him at each
station. According to Mr.E.Joldan, Qalam Rasul (also known as Baba
Qalam) covered this distance in twenty four hours on horse-back.
Mohammed Issa has claimed that once he had covered the journey
from Leh to Sinkiang in ten days, whereas this journey normally took
more than one month on horseback. One adventurous Arghon,
Khoshal Ramzan, went to Sinkiang alone. The route between Leh and
Sinkiang contains many high passes and bridgeless turbulent rivers.

These Arghon travellers were a cheerful, flamboyant and
colourful lot. They were fond of music and dance. Qalam Rasul
introduced the Dragon and Amban dances to Leh which became very
popular in Ladakh. He had seen these dances in Kashghar. Qalam
Rasul and his companions were also the prime movers behind the
archery festival in Leh and they delighted their audience with their
gimmicks and antics.

A caravan consisted of many interesting individuals. To cite
one example, this is a description of Hedin's party. Tondup Sonam
was a hunter and provided all the fresh meat. Hedin called him 'The
Grand Court Hunt Man'. Rigzin was the jester who amused others
with his wit. Mohammed Rahim Ali was the right hand man. Islam
Akhon was the horse watchman. Tondup Gyalchan, a pony-man, was
the storyteller. Every night he narrated an instalment of the lengthy
epic of 'Gyalam Kesar' after a long and tedious journey during the
day. Haji Ghulam Rasul was the cook for the caravan leader,
Mohammed Issa. The seventy five year old Abdul Gafur was the
oldest porter whereas Abdul was the youngest in the caravan at
eighteen years old.

In Dunmore's team, Islam Junior was working as a pony-man
as well as a tailor. Sidiq and Puchog were both pony-men and
cobblers whereas Shukur Ali and Ghulam Rasul were pony-men and
farriers.

Now I would like to give a brief description of these well-
known adventurers.

Mohammed Issa served as the caravan leader for Carey,
Younghusband, Dalgleish, Dutreuil de Rhines, Rawling, Ryder, Hedin
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and some other explorers. He had been caravan leader in the Lhasa campaign in 1903-4 under the leadership of Younghusband. For thirty years he had travelled in most parts off central Asia and was well acquainted with many parts of Tibet. He spoke Turki, Tibetan and Hindustani fluently.

In his book 'Transhimalaya' Hedin mentioned Mohammed Issa with these words:

'He was a fine man, tall and strong as a bear with great power of endurance, reliable and honest and after a few day's journey with him, I found that my caravan could not have been entrusted to a better hand. He was always witty and amusing, always cheerful and ready for a joke and kept up the spirits of the rest in depressing circumstances.' Mohammed Issa died in June 1907 at the age of fifty three at Skadenzang in Tibet, in the service of Sven Hedin.

The death of his caravan leader was a great shock to Hedin and he paid the following glowing tribute to the deceased in the Turki language at the small funeral ceremony:

'During all my journey, I had never had a more efficient, experienced and faithful caravan leader. He had maintained discipline in the caravan, been a father to men and taken the best care of the animals. He had been an excellent interpreter and had treated the natives with prudence and tact. By his happy, humorous disposition, he had kept all the others in good temper. In difficult situations he had always found the right way out. In unknown country, he had climbed passes and summits to look for the best route. He had always gone himself and not sent others. His memory would always be cherished and honoured among us; and he had always earned a great name in the exploration of Asia.' Hedin placed an inscription engraved on a stone on the grave of Mohammed Issa. At the end of this expedition, Hedin and six Ladakhis reached Simla on 16th September, 1908. Viceroy Lord Minto and Lady Minto received them and Hedin related episodes of his travels before an audience of one hundred and fifty people. Among those present were the Commander in Chief, Lord Kitchener, a couple of Generals and the Rajas of Alwar and Gawalior. The Ladakhis wept when they parted from Hedin and Lord and Lady Minto remarked 'What faithfulness! What devotion! Their tears are more expressive than words.'

Mohammed Issa was deeply mourned by other explorers. In the Geographical Journal of April 1909, Rawling refers to him as follows:

'Having mentioned Saka-Dzong, let me break off one moment to pay a token of respect to the memory of that faithful servant of Sven Hedin who died here. Mohammed Issa was one of the finest
characters it has been my fortune to be thrown with. Trustworthy and indomitable in his work, his knowledge of Asia was unequalled by any native.'

Galwan Rasul was also an adventurous traveller and a prominent caravan leader like Mohammed Issa. He travelled with different explorers when he was very young. In 1892 he went to Pamir with Lord Denmore. In 1895 after traversing difficult terrains in Tibet, he reached near to Lhasa together with the American explorer George Littledale. The same year he travelled to the Baltoro and Siachen glaciers in an expedition organised by Arthur Neve. In 1901, he went to central Asia on a hunting trip with Philips and Church and on their return to Leh he was offered a turban at a function by Philips in token of their appreciation of his services. He served with many other explorers including Younghusband, Martine, Professor Ronald Dixon, Dr. Filippo de Filippi and an American traveller Robert Brot.

It was on the persuasion of Robert Brot that Galwan Rasul wrote his autobiography entitled 'Servant of the Sahibs' which describes his early life and some expeditions. He mentions his reasons for travelling as follows:

'My relations in Sinkiang were against my travelling. Offering financial help, they persuaded me to give up the hard life of a traveller, but I spurned their offer and told them that I find immense consolation in wandering.'

Younghusband described Galwan Rasul in these words:

'He is a very diligent, hardy and strong man. Any mountaineer will be proud of his great achievements. I have never seen such a man in all my life. He is clearly a popular singer and has also a great delight in banjo playing.'

Once when Dunmore's caravan strayed from the recognised road in Aksai-chin, Galwan Rasul succeeded in locating a new route through a ravine. This ravine is now known as Galwan Nullah. Dunmore has described Rasul as 'Old Francatelli'.

Qalam Rasul was a contemporary of Galwan Rasul. It was said in Leh that Baba Qalam passed his entire life on horseback! he certainly travelled extensively in central Asia, China, Tibet and Baltistan. Our history teacher used to say:

'Had Baba Qalam been literate and written about his travels, his name would be taken with the eminent explorers of the world.'

When he was barely ten years old, a British Joint Commissioner at Leh employed him to graze his sheep and look after

* The reason is obscure. At one time Francatelli was chef to Queen Victoria (ed.).
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his ducks.

Mr. E. Joldan, in his article 'Adventures of Baba Qalam' wrote:

'Baba Qalam as a courier of the British Joint Commissioner covered the two hundred and forty miles between Leh and Srinagar on horseback in twenty four hours. Ponies were changed every five miles or so where men waited with fresh horses and a bonfire. As soon as the letter was given to him, he went to the nearby willow grove, cut a stout branch, peeled its bark, carefully slit a portion into two, placed the envelope in between and tied the two ends with string. He then hurried to the bath-room of the rest-house, tore a piece of red curtain and attached it to the stick. Selecting the fastest pony collected there for the Commissioner's party, he galloped towards Kashmir. The red cloth and the sealed envelope, plus the personality of the courier drew immediate attention everywhere on the way. He dashed back with the reply and delivered it at Spitiuk to the Joint Commissioner who gave him a pat on the back and a few rupees as Bakshish.'

Qalam Rasul is mainly remembered for his travels in central Asia with Major Malcolm and Captain Welby in 1896. He had a row with the latter and was forced to part company with the caravan. Qalam Rasul and his two companions ate grass, leather goods and the flesh of dead animals in order to survive. After experiencing great hardships, they reached China via Kashgar and eventually arrived back in Leh after three years. Their relatives had given up hope for their safe return and presuming them dead, had performed the funeral rituals.

Qalam Rasul was an excellent conversationalist and was also very witty. E. Joldan writes:

'Baba Qalam had several characteristics of a born storyteller; fluency of language, lucidity of description, modulation of voice, appropriate actions and an occasional dash of exaggeration here and there, without which one would be a dull story-teller. He could make others laugh but never did himself.'

Shukur Ali was also a contemporary of Qalam Rasul and Galwan Rasul. He was the first Ladakhi to cross the Mustagh Pass. Mustagh means mountain of ice. Younghusband dedicated a chapter to Shukur Ali in his book 'The Northern Frontier of Kashmir' and also published his photograph. He wrote:

'Shukur Ali was the most faithful and my favourite of all servants. He was the most cheery, happy-go-lucky, easy-going man who ever proved a good servant in spite of his carelessness. Always laughing, always chaffing with the pony men or coolies, always loosing something vitally necessary, but always ready to do the hardest and most dangerous piece of work. When the crucial moment arrived,
he was the only Ladakhi who dared to cross the Mustagh Pass with me.

The Maharaja Rastap Singh awarded a medal and a certificate to Shukur Ali on the recommendation of Younghusband. He was also exempted from Begar or 'forced labour' practised at that time in Ladakh. About Shukur Ali, Sven Hedin observed:

'He was so unconsciously comical that one almost died of laughter as he opened his mouth, and he was my oldest acquaintance among this group of more or less experienced Asiatics.'

My paper would be incomplete without any reference to Chhumbel who hailed from Zangskar, and was the faithful companion to the Pandit explorers Nain Singh, Kishan Singh and Kalian Singh. The Pandit explorers were trained by the officials of British India to explore the uplands of central Asia and Tibet. They travelled in the disguise of pilgrims or members of the trade mission to Lhasa, (the Lopchag). To help them in their disguise, they carried a rosary and a prayer wheel like all good Tibetans. However, instead of the one hundred and eight beads normally carried, their rosaries had exactly one hundred and every tenth bead was marked with a bigger one. One bead was counted after one hundred paces, a large one marked one thousand. With due piety, the disguised Lamas murmured the Buddhist prayer 'om mani padme hum', turned the prayer wheel and dropped a bead to count the distance. The prayer wheel was fitted to take long strips of paper on which they jotted their journey notes. To hide their identity, the explorers worked under various pseudonyms.

Chhumbel and the explorers were in perfect harmony. He was true and faithful to the Pandit explorers throughout the hazardous journey enduring hardships cheerfully and willingly. Even in difficulties, he never divulged the secret of the explorers. When Pandit Kishan Singh was robbed by bandits in the Changthang and was deserted by another companion, Chhumbel stood firm. In the last stage of the journey, when Kishen Singh had run completely out of cash, Chhumbel took the begging bowl in his hand and followed his master. He suffered from frost-bite, sun-blindness and lost his toe, but he never deserted his master.
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